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ABSTRACT

Asset mapping is an effective tool for understanding the wealth of talent and resources that exists in each community--even those with small populations or suffering from poverty and economic distress. The long-term development of a community rests on its ability to uncover and build on the strengths and assets of its people, institutions, and informal organizations. Five steps are presented for applying the asset mapping model. The beginning point involves an effort to map the community's assets, including the talents of local residents, emerging leaders, local institutions, informal community and neighborhood organizations, and existing community leaders who are committed to building a more vibrant community. Next, relationships should be built between residents, institutions, and informal groups. This involves providing opportunities for emerging leaders to have an active voice in long-term economic development strategies for the community. Step 3 involves mobilizing these identified resources for economic development. Step 4 is convening the community to develop a shared vision for the future. This requires active discussions, debates, and disagreements that identify which priority issues need to be dealt with first. Finally, outside resources that can support local priority activities should be located. Communities that have local partnerships firmly established can ensure that outside resources are used to support the community's priorities. (TD)

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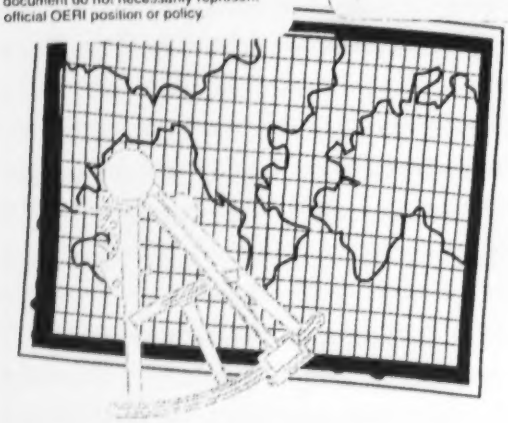

Mapping the Assets of Your Community: A Key Component for Building Local Capacity

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Introduction

In many communities across the country, it is not uncommon for local leaders and citizens to assemble together to try to make their community an even better place in which to live. Unfortunately, the beginning point for these discussions usually is focused on the various problems and concerns existing in the community. In some cases, these community groups seek the advice of friends and neighbors as to what they feel are the major problems. In other instances, elaborate community-wide surveys are conducted of local residents seeking their input on various topics.

In the end, what is produced is a laundry list of all the problems being experienced by residents of these communities. The list might include concerns with the local school system, the lack of health services, transportation problems, inadequate child care services, limited availability of jobs that pay a decent wage, or the lack of good recreation programs for children. No matter what community you are talking about, or how big or small the community might be in terms of population, community groups that begin taking a hard look at their community by first documenting all of its "problems," are already starting things off on the wrong foot.

That's not to suggest that communities should try to sweep all their problems under the rug. What it does indicate is the best way to effectively address the challenges that face communities is to have a good knowledge of the resources available to work on local issues. So, an important beginning point involves mapping the assets of the community – the skills and talents of local residents, as well as the capabilities available or possible through local organizations and institutions. Collectively, these resources offer the wherewithal to address the host of important issues impacting the community.

In this brief article, a procedure for mapping the assets of a community is described. The approach is one that has been developed by John P. Kretzmann and John L. McKnight in their book, *Building Communities From the Inside Out: A Path Toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community's Assets* [4]. It is a process that can be used in any community, and offers an effective strategy for involving a variety of people and organizations in helping bring about improvements in a communities.

While this document embraces many of the key concepts advanced in the Kretzmann and McKnight volume, we seek to extend their work in two important ways. First, we offer a

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creative strategy for uncovering the pool of individuals who have the ingredients for taking on greater community leadership responsibilities. Second, we discuss the role that community asset mapping can play in promoting the type of community development that is concerned with engaging local people in community enhancement efforts.

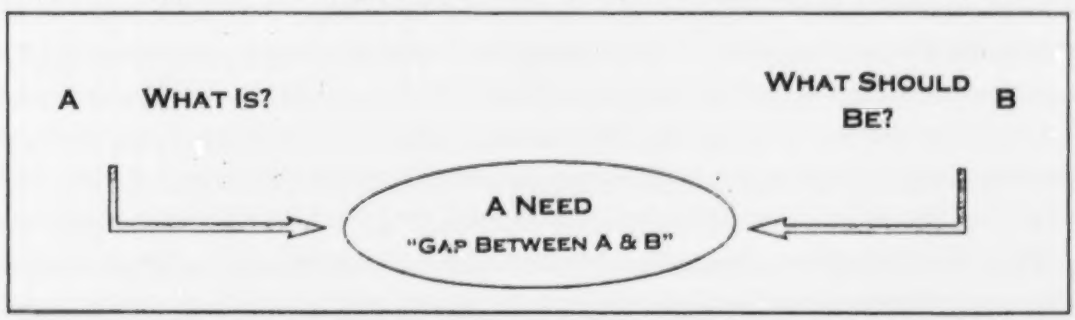
IN ITS SIMPLEST FORM, WHAT NEEDS ASSESSMENT DOES IS PROVIDE A FORMAL TOOL FOR IDENTIFYING LOCAL NEEDS, PLACING NEEDS IN ORDER OF PRIORITY IMPORTANCE, AND TARGETING RESOURCES TO HELP RESOLVE LOCAL PROBLEMS DEEMED TO BE OF CRITICAL IMPORTANCE TO THE WELFARE OF THE COMMUNITY.

Before moving into a more in-depth treatment of asset mapping, we wish to offer an overview of the needs assessment process. We describe this approach and contrast its key features with those associated with community asset mapping. While brief, our discussion is intended to illustrate that local ownership of the needs assessment effort is less likely to occur if not preceded with a sound community asset mapping activity.

Major Features of the Needs Assessment and Asset Mapping Approaches

It was not that many years ago that most people involved in community development activities felt that one of the critical first steps in carrying out any community improvement efforts was to uncover the set of problems or concerns existing in a community. In many respects, this appeared to be a logical step. Most communities have finite resources – be they human, physical, or financial – and as such, communities must take a hard look at what problems exist in their community. In its simplest form, what needs assessment does is provide a formal tool for identifying local needs, placing needs in order of priority, and targeting resources to help resolve local problems deemed to be of critical importance to the welfare of the community.

One of the unfortunate by-products of starting a community development initiative with the use of a needs assessment tool is that it transmits to local people the impression their community has many shortcomings. This should not be surprising in light of how "needs" are defined. The commonly accepted definition of a "need" is that it represents a gap or discrepancy between an existing state of affairs (the what is) and a desired or preferred result (the what should be) [1]. Just imagine how communities feel when at the end of their needs assessment project, they find themselves confronted with a laundry list of all the things that are wrong with their local areas. Rather, it suggests that community development should begin with a systematic assessment of the assets that exist in the community. There are three major arenas that serve as focal point for uncovering community assets:



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residents, formal institutions, and informal organizations located within the community.

Once we know the full breadth of people, organizational, and institutional resources that exist in a community, we can then move in the direction of undertaking a needs assessment. Thus, as priority "needs" are uncovered, we have excellent information about the rich pool of people and groups who have the type of skills and interests needed to tackle these difficult issues.

Table 1: **Contrasting the "Needs" vs. "Assets" Approach to Community Enhancement.**

Needs	Assets
Focuses on deficiencies	Focuses on effectiveness
Results in fragmentation of responses to local needs	Builds interdependencies
Makes people consumers of services; builds dependence	Identifies ways that people can give of their talents
Residents have little voice in deciding how to address local concerns	Seeks to empower people

Sources: Kretzmann and McKnight [4] and Fiscus and Flora [2].

Table 1 briefly describes the distinguishing features of a community development process that begins with "needs" versus "assets." As noted earlier, when "needs assessment" is employed as the first strategy for determining which issues communities should be working on, a long list of local deficiencies are typically uncovered. Because the number of concerns are so voluminous, it is not uncommon for these concerns to be simply passed on to those institutions typically responsible for addressing such problems. So, education issues are given to the school board, social services to the human services agencies, economic development concerns to the chamber of commerce or economic development authority, land use issues to local government officials, and safety concerns to law enforcement agencies.

This type of divvying up of local problems has some serious shortcomings. For one, it tends to result in a fragmentation in response to local concerns given that only a limited number of people and organizations are involved in addressing local needs. Second, it does not allow local people and groups to explore links that might exist among these concerns. For example, successful economic development activities often are dependent upon the availability of a skilled and educated work force, as well as the availability of good community services.

Unless all the people and organizations who are involved in these various sectors of the community are working together, it is quite possible that one sector could embrace strategies that will have negative impacts on the other sectors. Third, local agencies charged with the responsibility of addressing these issues generally respond by establishing new programs or policies. As such, the people being targeted with these programs or policies end up being "consumers" of such activities. In essence, they become dependent on those organizations and agencies that have implemented services to address certain local needs. Finally, the needs approach often denies community residents an opportunity to have a voice in determining how local concerns can best be addressed.

In comparison, asset mapping begins with the philosophy that all local residents, regardless of age, gender, race, ethnic background, place of residence, or other characteristics, can play an effective role in addressing important local matters. Local people and organizations are encouraged to explore how problems might be interrelated, and to respond to these issues in a coordinated, collaborative fashion. Furthermore, they are asked to give of their time and talents in implementing the strategies they have had a voice in devising. Through it all, local people and groups feel a sense of empowerment because they have been part of the process along each step of the way.

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Defining Community Development

We hear a good deal about community development. But not everyone has the same view of what community development means. Some believe it refers to "development IN the community," while others view it as "development OF the community." Believe it or not, there is a big difference between the words "IN" and "OF" when speaking of community development. Development "IN" the community suggests the major interest is on attracting new businesses, new facilities or new services to the community. It represents efforts to do all that can be done to add to the physical, service and economic infrastructure of a community. This is sometimes referred to as the "bricks and mortar" approach to community development.

Development "OF" the community, however, does not have the physical, service and economic infrastructure as its major focus, at least not at first. Rather, it seeks to uncover and expand the knowledge and skills of people in the community. The belief is that community-wide improvements (be they physical, service or economic infrastructure) cannot be fully realized unless people representing all parts of the community are involved in deciding the future of their community. So, the emphasis is on finding the talents that exist in the community and locating people with the potential to be community leaders [5]. Building on the skills that people already have serves as the best foundation for dealing with the variety of concerns that exist in the community. As such, asset mapping represents an essential step in promoting the development "OF" the community.

According to Kretzmann and McKnight, community development activities that are based on asset mapping share three important characteristics:

Asset-based: Community development efforts begin by developing an understanding of what exists in the community right now – the abilities of local residents, associations, and institutions. It does not begin by focusing on what is wrong with the community or what may be missing.

Internally Focused: Strategic planning or priority setting focuses on assets found within the community and does not rely upon the advice of outside experts or consultants.

Relationship Driven: Local people, informal organizations and institutions work hard to connect with one another in order to be sure they are working as a team, and not against one another. This means that good communication is essential.

It Begins With Individuals

Using "asset mapping" as a technique is most likely to be successful if the individuals, organizations, and communities using this procedure truly believe that every community – no matter how small, or how poor – has a rich pool of assets. Successfully locating the talents of individuals requires a genuine belief in the following principles:

- Every person has talents, skills, and gifts important to a community.
- Each time individuals use these abilities, the community in which they live is strengthened and these people feel a sense of empowerment.
- Strong communities are places where the capacities of local individuals are identified, valued, and used.
- The development "OF" the community is built upon the talents and resources of its members.

Inventorying the individual assets of a community involves the use of a tool called the

Capacity Inventory of Individuals (Capacity Inventory). The Capacity Inventory consists of four important parts:

- Skills Information
- Community Skills
- Enterprising Interests and Experience
- Personal Information

Each of these components are described more fully in Table 2. The Capacity Inventory represents an effective strategy for uncovering the variety of talents in the community. It is essential that this valuable pool of information be acted upon. To do so, a well-developed plan for translating this information into action is important. Have a good feel for why this information is being collected, how it is going to be used, what timetable you will be following to match the skills of local people with improvement activities of the community. A detailed Capacity Inventory form, that can be administered to community or neighborhood residents, is provided.

Tapping the Talents of Emerging Leaders

In every community, there is an existing cadre of individuals who perform leadership roles, either in visible ways or behind the scenes, within the community. These persons may occupy formal positions of authority in the community, such as local government or political leaders. Others may be employed in important positions within the business, industrial or financial sectors of the community. All in all, these individuals have access to important resources that can be mobilized to influence the outcome of many local issues of importance to the welfare of the community.

However, there are a number of people who have not taken on community leadership roles, but who have the ingredients that make them ideal candidates to be engaged in leadership activities. All it takes is an opportunity to exercise these talents. These individuals often have had modest involvement in community-related activities. These experiences, however limited in their nature, provide the building blocks for expanding leadership in the community.

Table 2: **Components of Capacity Inventory of Individuals**

Part I. Skills Information	**Part II. Community Skills**
• Lists all the skills that the person has learned at home, at school, in the community, or at their place or work. • Identify the "priority skills" the individual feels he/she possesses (the things they feel they are best at).	• Identify the different types of community work in which the person has participated. • Identify the type of community work the person would be will to take part in at some time in the future.
Part III. Enterprising Interests and Experience	**Part IV. Personal Information**
• Gather information on whether the person has ever considered starting a business and whether the individual is currently involved in running a business of any type. • Document what barriers are preventing the person from starting his/her own business; or, if they already operate their own business, what could help the person make his/her business even stronger.	• Collect just a few person information items about the individual in order to be able to follow-up with him/her at the appropriate time. This would include name, address, and telephone number.

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How might we uncover those individuals who represent prime candidates as "emerging" leaders in your locality? Certainly, the Capacity Inventory serves as a good beginning point for carrying out such an assessment (see the section that explores the "Community Skills" of individuals). However, if you wish to conduct a more extensive assessment of individuals who may have the seeds of leadership in a community, we have prepared a new document titled, Community Participation and Leadership Inventory. This questionnaire delves more deeply into the type of community-relevant activities that individuals may have been engaged in over the course of the past few years. The inventory explores local residents' involvement in the following activities:

- Political or Governmental Efforts
- Community, Civic and Service Organizations
- Religious Organizations
- Social and Recreational Activities
- Patriotic and Fraternal Groups
- Education and Youth Organizations

Active involvement in one or more of the organizations highlighted in this inventory, or working on specific issues of importance to the neighborhood or community, constitute the very seeds of leadership. As John Gardner [3] notes, "tomorrow's leaders will likely have begun their work by being involved in more specialized types of activities in the community." The Community Participation and Leadership Inventory is designed to help local areas uncover the leadership potential of local residents, including the leadership talents of those individuals who have been historically left out of decision-making activities within the local community. The key is to make sure that these individuals are offered the opportunity to further advance their leadership skills and to be part of a broader, more diversified local leadership that seeks to include, rather than exclude, local people in important community decision-making activities.

Local Institutions Can Help Build Community Capacity

There are certain activities that take place which are intended to meet the basic needs of our society. For example, the family plays a critical role in nurturing, protecting and raising their young. Every society finds a way to meet the social needs of its people. This also happens to be true for many communities. When the strategies for meeting the needs of a community become formal, and expectations develop as to who is responsible for carrying out certain activities, or how people are expected to behave, then we have the makings of an institution. Institutions represent patterned activities that are designed to meet important social needs of local residents. Carrying out these important functions is essential if communities are to continue existing over time. They may be provided by public, private or nonprofit entities.

One of the best ways to remember what major institutions exist in your community is to think of the word KEEPRA. Each letter represents an institution commonly found in most communities. They are as follows:

- ***Kinship (Family):*** The family carries out a number of important activities, such as the care and socialization of the young, providing food, housing, and nurturing for family members, and the biological reproduction of the human race.
- ***Economic:*** This involves the production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services in a community. The community's economic system influences the kind of work is available, where jobs are located, how much people earn, the quality of the work environment, the prospects for future jobs,

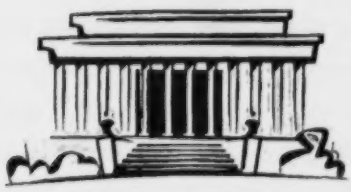
Figure 1: **The Community's Major Institutions**

Kinship

Economic

Education

Political



Religious

Associations

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and the level of unemployment and underemployment in the area.

- ***Education:*** The major function of education is to prepare youth to be successful, contributing members of society upon reaching adulthood. This includes preparing them for the world of work, but also passing on to them knowledge, values, beliefs, and accepted ways of behaving (what we often call "norms") that we believe young members of our community should learn.

INFORMAL ORGANIZATIONS CAN BE KEY PLAYERS IN HELPING PROMOTE THE BETTERMENT OF ANY COMMUNITY OR NEIGHBORHOOD.

- ***Political (Government):*** The political (or governmental) institution is the arena in which power and authority is acquired and exercised. Its major functions include: (1) protecting the life, liberty and property of local residents (such as enforcing laws and providing police protection); (2) regulating conflict, including developing procedures and practices for resolving disputes; and (3) planning, coordinating, and providing public facilities and services to local residents.
- ***Religious:*** The religious institution plays an important role in attending to the spiritual needs of local citizens. In addition, it serves as an important source of support for certain moral values, norms, and customs. It also provides residents with personal support in time of need.
- ***Associations:*** Associations refer to the civic, service, social, fraternal, and other voluntary organizations available for people to participate in local activities. They operate with formal constitutional rules and by-laws, and operate with a team of officers and/or a board of directors.

Communities vary in terms of the availability and strength of their institutions. For example, large communities have many schools and churches and a good number of full-time paid professionals working for the local government. In rural areas, however, one might find only one high school, a few churches, and a local government managed by officials who are paid little or no salary.

• Link the assets of individuals with the interests and capabilities of local institutions. For example, individuals who are interested in establishing a micro-loan program to support the creation of home-based businesses could link up with a local financial institution and the community chamber of commerce, two groups who may have indicated an interest in exploring innovative strategies for stimulating local economic development activities.

• Actively work to build links between local institutions with interests and capabilities that complement one another. These types of mutually beneficial relationships are what lies at the center of asset-based development.

• Build ties between local institutions and resources existing outside the community. This involves making use of links that local institutions have with larger systems – links that can provide financial, human, or physical resources to the community. For example, a local bank that is part of a larger state or regional banking system has access to a large pool of financial capital outside the local area, which can be re-directed to support community improvement activities.

Informal Organizations: Another Vital Link

The third dimension of the asset mapping

process involves carrying out an inventory of the various informal organizations found in a community. Such informal groups tend to involve people who share a common interest, such as hunting, youth sports leagues, bowling, crime prevention, religious, or political interests. These groups, while successful in using the skills and talents of many individuals, are quite informal in their structure. Thus, they have no constitution or by-laws, have no formal slate of officers/board of directors or members, and tend to gather only when the need arises. One example of an informal organization is the neighborhood crime prevention group that meets on an "as needed" basis to discuss ways to reduce crime in their neighborhoods.

Informal organizations can be key players in helping promote the betterment of any community or neighborhood. In many respects, this is because many local people tend to contribute their talents to local activities that are sponsored by such informal groups. It is through these informal entities that local residents tend to feel empowered.

Examples of informal organizations likely to be found in most communities include:

- Church Groups: prayer groups, stewardship committee, youth group, service group
- Community Celebrations Committees: Annual Fair Committee, Arts and Crafts Festival Committee, July 4th Parade Committee
- Neighborhood Groups: crime watch, homeowner's association
- Sports Leagues: bowling, basketball, baseball, fishing, hunting clubs

Doing An Inventory of Local Informal Organizations

There are at least three ways in which an inventory of local informal organizations can be undertaken:

Step 1: EXAMINE PRINTED MATERIALS

The following sources can prove invaluable in identifying some of the informal groups existing in a community:

- Newspapers and local magazines that might highlight the work of local informal organizations
- Community directories that list both formal and informal service organizations in the community

Step 2: CONTACT LOCAL FORMAL INSTITUTIONS

Many of the more formal organizations may be aware of informal groups that have been organized in a community or neighborhood. It is not unusual for such groups to use the following institutions as a gathering place for their meetings.

- Libraries
- Parks and Recreational Facilities
- Churches
- Schools

Step 3: CONTACT LOCAL INDIVIDUALS

If time and resources are available, try surveying a sample of people living in various community neighborhoods. Ask those being surveyed to what groups they belong. Questions to pose to these individuals include:

- Can you name any organizations that you have participated in or have heard about? Does it meet in your community or neighborhood?
- Is there a local community or neighborhood improvement organization in your area?

- Is there any church or religious organization that you are involved in? If yes, do they have different clubs or groups of which you are aware?
- Do you get together in an informal way with your neighbors to address common issues of concern?
- How else do you feel a part of the community? How else do you get involved in your neighborhood?

As the list of informal organizations begins to take shape, it is important to collect information on the goals and activities of these organizations. This offers a community a wealth of data on the capabilities that already exist among groups in the community. But remember, many of these groups – if asked – are likely to be willing to do more in support of their community or its neighborhoods. So, the list can also serve as a beginning point in mobilizing various informal groups that can work together to promote the long-term well-being of the community.

Applying the Asset Mapping Model: Community Economic Development as an Example

In most rural areas, a major task is to create jobs that can offer local residents a chance to earn a decent living and to be positive, productive contributors to the community. Kretzmann and McKnight demonstrate how an effective economic development plan for a community can be shaped using the community asset mapping model. The strategy involves mobilizing the assets of the entire community around an economic development vision and a plan. It entails five important steps:

Step 1: MAP THE ASSETS

The beginning point involves an effort to map the community's assets. Once begun, it is important the process of locating and making inventories of the gifts, talents, and abilities of individuals, associations, and institutions be carried out on an ongoing basis. Use the following list as a check of whether the full scope of the community's assets have been considered:

Have we done an inventory of:

_____ The talents of local residents (including new people who have moved to the community)?

_____ The "emerging leaders" that can be found in the community?

_____ Local institutions, including their physical, human, and financial assets?

_____ Informal community and neighborhood organizations?

_____ Existing community leaders who are committed to using the gifts and talents of local people, institutions and informal organizations to build a stronger, more vibrant community?

Step 2: BUILD RELATIONSHIPS AND BROADEN THE LOCAL LEADERSHIP

The community becomes stronger and more self-reliant every time residents, institutions, and informal groups are linked together in solving local problems or concerns. Part of this process involves expanding the opportunities for emerging leaders to have an active voice in giving shape to long-term economic development strategies for the community – strategies that best reflect the talents, skills, and possibilities of people, institutions, and informal groups that are an integral part of that locality.

Step 3: MOBILIZE FOR ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

In many rural communities, an important economic strategy involves building upon what currently exists in a community. This involves locating and mobilizing the skills of individuals that can be used for economic develop-

ment purposes, as well as looking at the role informal organizations and institutions can play in promoting economic growth. For example, are there new markets for products that can be developed simply by connecting existing institutions together? Are there goods and services the community might be able to export to other areas? Are there goods and services that the community now imports that could be produced locally?

Step 4: CONVENE THE COMMUNITY AND DEVELOP A VISION FOR THE FUTURE

Having a shared vision and plan is critical to the process of strengthening communities. All members of the community need a voice in deciding what they value most in their community, and what direction they would like to have the community take in the next 5-10 years and beyond. This dialogue is essential if the community is to move forward. This requires active discussions, debates, and disagreements. In the end, however, the community must have a shared understanding of which priority issues it needs to deal with right now, and which problems might be better handled in the future. Once immediate issues are decided, getting the broadest array of people, institutions, and informal groups involved as a team helps to further build the capacity of the community to improve the well-being of its members.

Step 5: LEVERAGE OUTSIDE RESOURCES TO SUPPORT LOCAL PRIORITY ACTIVITIES

When communities have succeeded in mapping their local assets, and taken steps to link the assets of the community together in order to address the priority needs of the community, then it is appropriate to locate outside resources. If a community does not have local partnerships firmly established, it runs the risk of having outside resources dictate how things should be done in the community. Strong and active local partnerships provide the mechanism to ensure outside resources are used to support priorities, strategies, and action plans the community itself has endorsed, and not what some outside individuals or institutions have determined is best for the community.

CONCLUSION

Asset mapping serves as an effective tool for understanding the wealth of talent and resources that exists in each community – even those with small populations or suffering from poverty and economic distress. The long-term development of a community rests on its ability to uncover and build on the strengths and assets of its people, institutions, and informal organizations. Included are creative strategies to identify and tap the wealth of leadership potential available in every community.

However, to be truly effective, asset mapping must take the essential step of linking these various talents and resources together. In isolation, these assets are likely to realize (at best) only modest advancements in the well-being of local people and their communities. Integration of these assets, however, provides the foundation for genuine improvements in the welfare of these people and their localities. In many respects, it truly reflects a commitment to make development "OF" the community a centerpiece of local community improvement activities – one in which local talents and skills are unleashed, treasured, and nurtured over time.

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